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The Creation Imitated in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

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I. Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is regarded, with William Wordsworth, as the leader of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. In 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge published their joint work, *Lyrical Ballads*, which signaled the advent of a new kind of poetry. *Lyrical Ballads* begins with Coleridge's masterpiece “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. When the poem was first published, it perplexed critics by its complex story, even being judged by some as a failure. Now we can generally read the poem in two ways: superficially, as a literal story; or more deeply, as a metaphysical one. The former, which had been the common way of receiving “The Ancient Mariner” for over a century, was replaced by the latter in the twentieth century. It was Robert Penn Warren who brought about the turning point in this history, advancing a theory that “The Ancient Mariner” had a dual structure, and thus solving the complexity of the poem.¹⁾

This thesis will discuss “The Ancient Mariner” from Warren's viewpoint, that is to say, the poem will be read metaphysically. Let me suggest two important themes that will lead us into the metaphysical reading: first, Coleridge's view of the Imagination, and

second, his theory of Art. Taken together, these two issues will bring us to a fuller interpretation of the poem.

II. Coleridge's View of the Imagination

It is generally agreed that Romantic poetry is highly characterized by its imaginative power. Wordsworth mentions in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", which is a kind of manifesto of the Romantic Movement, that he throws over common incidents "a certain colouring of imagination" whereby they are presented "in an unusual way" ²⁾ in his poetry. According to this remark, the Imagination appears to involve the poet's perceptions and expression when he composes poems. For further comments on the Imagination one can turn to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, in which the author defines its power from a philosophical viewpoint. Coleridge was the first writer in the history of English Literature to theorize the Imagination, and this shows that the faculty meant a great deal to him and his works, including "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". To put it another way, Imagination is the key to understanding Coleridge's poetry. Let us now look at the power of the Imagination as a clue to an understanding of "The Ancient Mariner": first we will consider how Coleridge discovered the idea and then we will go on to discuss the essence of its power.

To trace the path by which Coleridge reached the idea of the Imagination provides a starting-point. We shall begin by examining the background reasons why he felt the faculty was needed. The eighteenth century was "the age of reason", as Matthew Arnold put it. There was much respect for reason and, one might say, morality

oppressed emotion. Added to this, eighteenth-century England was dominated by empiricism, whose materialistic view insisted that the world consisted of matter and its motion, ignoring the spiritual existence of human beings. Coleridge was distressed by the conflict between matter and mind. The mechanical world alienating spirituality seemed to him to be a barren land where no life was born. He needed to make peace in the disorder of reason and emotion and recover the organic land.

We should notice that this wish of harmony is a reaction against English rationalism in the eighteenth century, and is one of the main elements which constitute the Romantic Movement in England. While Coleridge was searching for something that could save him from disorder and bring him a sense of union, he met with the poetry of William Wordsworth for the first time, receiving “the sudden effect” ³⁾ on his mind. Let us now turn to this poetry of Wordsworth which inspired Coleridge, in order to get nearer to the question of how Imagination functions. Here, for example, are the opening lines of the poem “Tintern Abbey”:

Five years have passed ; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. — Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion ; ⁴⁾ (ll. 1 – 8)

The poet revisits the banks of the River Wye after an interval of five years, observing the landscape around him with his keen eyes and

ears, as the verbs, “behold” and “hear”, suggest. The description of nature is based upon the poet’s careful observation, but it should be noted that another scene is contained in these lines, namely, the scene the poet saw “five years” ago. The present and the past are united by his imaginative recollection, or it would be more accurate to say that the truthful observation is modified by his subjective feeling. This is the point where Coleridge discovered Imagination as the power of union.

In Chapter IV of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge states his direct impression upon reading Wordsworth’s poems :

[Wordsworth’s poems evoke] the union of deep feeling with profound thought ; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed. ⁵⁾

This is an interesting comment, for we can see here the exact moment when Coleridge discovers the power of harmony. He finds a union of reason and emotion in Wordsworth’s poetry ; in other words, a delicate balance of truthful observation and subjective modification of what is observed. Moreover, he realizes that this state of harmony is generated by “the imaginative faculty”. The words “union” and “balance” represent the very heart of what Coleridge believes is Imagination.

Having considered how Coleridge reached his idea of Imagination, we are now ready to discuss the essence of its power. Developing theoretically the idea inspired by Wordsworth, Coleridge establishes a definition of Imagination based upon his own philosophical viewpoint. In Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* one finds the result of this process ; the chapter is titled “On the Imagination or Esemplastic

Power." "Esemplastic" is a word coined by Coleridge and it is defined in O. E. D. as "the function of moulding into unity". The first point to note in the chapter is that the author classifies this faculty of union into two categories: primary and secondary. First, he defines the primary Imagination :

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. ⁶⁾

He remarks that the primary Imagination is a vital power which works chiefly when we see, feel and think. To put it plainly, this function is the origin of all our feeling and thinking. More noteworthy is what follows, where the author discusses the primary Imagination using two contrasting words: "finite" and "infinite". While the former characterizes human beings, the latter represents God. The fully capitalized "I AM" is God as the absolute self, and it is entirely fair to assume that Coleridge means the Creation here. We must also draw attention to the term "repetition" which goes to the core of the problem. It follows from what has been said thus far that Imagination is the power which "repeats" God's Creation in human beings' minds.

Next, let us examine the secondary Imagination. Coleridge points out that, while the primary Imagination works in the general perceptions of human beings, the secondary Imagination functions in artistic creation. He argues :

The secondary Imagination I consider as an echoe of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the

primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. ⁷⁾

We see that both types of Imagination share common functions and they are different only in how they work. It is worth noticing that Coleridge maintains here that the secondary Imagination, which is a reflection of the primary, co-exists with the will. This shows that he respects human beings' consciousness in artistic creation. How the secondary Imagination works in creating Art is then illustrated in detail :

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. ⁸⁾

Three chemical terms are found: dissolve, diffuse and dissipate. These remind us of a chemical reaction generating new and refined matter, and through this process organic unity is borne out of a state of confusion.

The author goes on to explain that the secondary Imagination strives to "idealize" and to "unify". Recall our earlier observation that the Imagination "repeats" God's Creation in human mind. Indeed, the Creation appears to be central to the issue here. In Genesis, which starts with God's Creation of the heavens and the earth, the beginning of the world is described as follows: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the Waters" (Genesis 1 : 2). What God saw on the earth at first was chaos, where nothing could be distinguished. God brought the light, separated land and sea, and let the land

produce vegetation. In six days God gave the disorder a state of union, in the process creating the organic realm and thus life. It seems reasonable to conclude that what Coleridge calls Imagination repeats this eternal act of Creation in human beings' mortal minds and always struggles to create unity in Art.

III. Coleridge's View of Art

The definition of what is called Art varies with each individual viewpoint. The term is often used collectively for painting, sculpture, music and poetry, and these have been produced since time immemorial; creating Art seems to be an instinctive act of human beings. In a short essay entitled "On Poesy or Art,"⁹⁾ Coleridge argues that Art and humanity are related, pointing out that nature holds an important element in artistic creation. However, a significant problem with such theories of Art is: Where does nature fit in? Coleridge was painfully conscious that nature and humanity, like reason and emotion, were alienated from each other. Thus he presented a new view of nature and man, and such became one of the foundations of the Romantic Movement. Let us now consider Coleridge's view of Art, which will lead us to an understanding of his poetical work. First, we shall examine how he relates Art and humanity, and then we will discuss his idea of poetry.

Let us begin by inquiring into the conflict between nature and humanity that distressed Coleridge. It is worthwhile to remember here that the Romantic Movement in England can be regarded as a reaction against certain trends of the eighteenth century. One can assume that Coleridge was tormented to find nature gradually being

alienated from humanity in an increasingly rationalistic society where a mechanized civilization dominated nature. Coleridge's short essay, "On Poesy or Art", starts with his observations on humanity and nature; humans communicate by sound and memory, and nature significantly gives them sensuous impressions, controlling their memory. This observation plainly expresses his belief that nature and humanity are deeply correlated. Then he turns to a definition of Art. To borrow his phrase, Art is "the power of humanizing nature".¹⁰⁾ While this idea represents his respect for nature, it also indicates that Coleridge believes that human will is as important as nature in the process of artistic creation. Such a view is well confirmed by the following remark: "Now Art...is mediatrix between, and reconciler of, nature and man."¹¹⁾ Here we find Coleridge's notion that Art plays an important role in reconciling nature and humanity.

Coleridge goes on to develop his theory about Art in his essay, declaring that "art is the imitatrix of nature".¹²⁾ This viewpoint leads to a further discussion. First of all, we have to look carefully into the idea of imitation, for it will be important to this issue. He points out that two elements must co-exist in all imitation.

These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine creations of art there must be a union of these disparates.¹³⁾

Those which are opposed to each other, likeness and unlikeness, constitute imitation. The word "union" reminds us again of the Creation, where God unified the chaos. When Coleridge says that Art imitates nature, he means that Art creates a state of union, as God did in the beginning of the world. There is evidence in support of this

interpretation : Coleridge states, “nature itself is to a religious observer the art of God”. ¹⁴⁾ We now reach his theory that Art imitates God’s act of Creation, and thus we may suppose that he associates artists with God in creating harmony.

It was mentioned above that the term “Art” is used collectively for various creations such as painting, music and poetry. For the moment we shall confine our attention to poetry, with which Coleridge is most deeply concerned. It is worth while examining how he regards poetry, one form of the Arts. Many poets and critics engaged in heated argument over poetry at the beginning of the Romantic Movement. What aroused the controversy was Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”, which is often considered a manifesto of the Romantic view of poetry. He reveals his view on poetry in order to defend his and Coleridge’s works included in *Lyrical Ballads*. One should notice, however, that the two poets have, strictly speaking, different opinions. First, let us have a look at Wordsworth’s ideas. His “Preface” signaled the end of Classicism, which held order in high esteem. Wordsworth makes light of metrical rules, and attaches greater importance to personal emotions. This opinion is well expressed in the following passage : “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. ¹⁵⁾ This comment indicates Wordsworth’s belief that emotion should overflow freely in poems ; the poet needs no forced art to check the emotional stream.

On the other hand, Coleridge presents a rather different view of poetry in Chapter XVIII of *Biographia Literaria*. Whereas Wordsworth respects emotion above all things, Coleridge insists that a poet’s mind works spontaneously to hold the emotional flow in writing poems. To put it another way, Coleridge thinks that metrical rules are as

important as a poet's subjective feelings. This relation between rules and emotion, counteracting each other, is called "salutary antagonism" ¹⁶⁾ in *Biographia Literaria*. The author develops this theory further, deducing that there are "two legitimate conditions" ¹⁷⁾ in every metrical work. The first condition is that as poetry is always produced from a poet's increased excitement, so it should be accompanied by "the natural language of excitement". ¹⁸⁾ The second is that as the poet's impression is composed into meter voluntarily with the poet's will, so the trace of "volition" ¹⁹⁾ should be discerned there. The author concludes that these two conditions, although they seem to be opposed, must be reconciled and must co-exist in metrical works. This "salutary antagonism" is further illustrated in passages such as the following :

There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an interpenetration of passion and will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose. ²⁰⁾

Here is revealed Coleridge's opinion that the two elements, passion and will, should be interpenetrated in poetry. Again we meet the word "union", and should here recall the idea that Art imitates God's act of Creation. Coleridge avers, "the composition of a poem is among the imitative arts". ²¹⁾ From this viewpoint, one will say that Coleridge imitates God's Creation when he composes poems and his works can be regarded as a state of union created by him as a creator. Therefore, it may be concluded that one can discover the Creation imitated in Coleridge's poetry.

IV. Dual Structure of the Poem

We are now in a position to discuss Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". When it is read superficially as a realistic story, it is often regarded as an "enigma" ²²⁾ for its obscurity. This thesis interprets the "Rime" not realistically but metaphysically. The two issues considered above enable us to elucidate the seemingly enigmatic story. In other words, Coleridge's theories of Imagination and Art are deeply related with the poem and are the very factors constituting what Warren calls its dual structure. The reason that the poem appears to be complex is that there exist many oppositions among characters and scenes. Let us take up some of these oppositions in order to solve the complexity and perhaps discover the poet's intentions there. At first, we will focus on the two principle characters, the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, and then we will deal with oppositions such as day and night, sun and moon, as described in the poem.

In the opening lines readers meet the two characters. The Mariner stops one of a group of young men on their way to a wedding ceremony. The old sailor forces that youth to stay with him and listen to his tale. The victim is overwhelmed by his unusual manner and agrees to listen. From the very opening it is clear that the poet has chosen to oppose the two characters. First of all, the old sailor is called "an ancient Mariner" (l. 1). ²³⁾ The word "ancient" sounds as if he is extremely old, and "mariner" gives the impression that he has been sailing since time immemorial. Indeed, "the ancient Mariner" seems to have transcended time. He has a "long grey beard"

and “glittering eye” (l. 3), and holds the young man with “his skinny hand” (l. 9). The sailor is thin and decrepit and attracts people with his keen spirit. This portrait suggests that he has gone through innumerable hardships on the sea.

On the other hands, the young man captured by the Mariner seems to be just an ordinary passer-by. He is invited to a wedding ceremony where his next of kin, the bridegroom, is celebrating. The ceremony is about to begin just as he is detained beside the wedding-hall, and he tries to tear himself away from the Mariner in vain. The glare of the old sailor’s eyes makes him obedient. He stands still and listens to the Mariner like “a three years’ child” (l. 15). Compared to the old and weird sailor, the Wedding-Guest seems to be an innocent child. From these observations on the opening scene of the poem, it becomes clear that there is a striking opposition between the two characters. The Mariner can be regarded as a symbol of experience, and the Wedding-Guest as that of innocence.

The Mariner starts to tell the young man a tale. His story of the terrible voyage begins with his words, “There was a ship” (l. 10). In the voyage he faces the fear of death, his ship being all alone in the ocean. He tastes every form of agony in his wrecked ship. The following lines describe his feelings of despair and suffering :

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink ;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink. (ll. 119 – 122)

The ship is isolated, being surrounded only by water. The seawater cannot quench the sailor’s thirst nor moisten the dried boards. What

he sees around the water then is a fantastic scene beyond all belief. The Mariner tells the young man that the water becomes rotten, calling it “slimy things” (l. 125).

A point worth noting here is that there is another scene, which is contrasted with the old sailor’s narration. It is the wedding ceremony to which the young man was invited. While the Mariner tells his tale, the ceremony is being held simulataneously, next to the two characters. The shabby old sailor and the Wedding-Guest in formal dress sometimes hear “the merry din” (l. 8) of the ceremony happening nearby. Readers are offered a glimpse of this other scene in the poem, though the poem is mainly composed of the Mariner’s story. To ignore the scene of the wedding, inserted here and there in the poem, is to miss the dual structure therein. Let us consider the following lines, which are placed between sections of sailor’s narration:

The bride hath paced into the hall,
Red as a rose is she ;
Nodding their heads before her goes
The merry minstrelsy. (ll. 33 – 36)

This stanza shows that the wedding ceremony starts with cheerful music. We can see a blessed bride who is beautiful as a rose. A wedding is often the most delightful moment in one’s life and an occasion when people sing the praises of life. They congratulate the young couple on their blessed future. It seems plain that the pleasant ceremony is represented as the opposite of the Mariner’s tale. In the undercurrent of that miserable tale the ceremony continues to the end of the poem.

Upon reflection on some of the following points, it becomes clear

that the poem has a dual structure. First, the Mariner's narration and the wedding ceremony occur simultaneously. What is more important is that the two scenes are extreme opposites. Whereas the old sailor's tale is a despairing experience in the past, the wedding ceremony is a present event where the young are delighted and full of hope for the future. Readers can hear a cheerful tune of the band and see the beautiful bride, although the dreadful voyage is only narrated and thus invisible. Viewed in this light, the voyage can be regarded as a symbol of unreality and the wedding ceremony as that of reality. To put it another way, there exists an opposition between spirit and matter. Yet, these two extremes are intertwined.

Let us then consider how the sun and the moon are described. The two are mentioned in the poem so many times that a great number of scholars have drawn attention to them. It is quite natural that the sailor, isolated in the middle of the ocean, should become keenly conscious of day and night. A 24-hour cycle is split into day and night. There is a sharp opposition between the two. The former is governed by the sun, under which people are lively and enjoy their life. The latter is ruled by the moon, which is associated with madness. The dark of night reminds us of death.

Generally, one is aware of this marked opposition. In the poem, however, the distinction of day and night becomes vague, as the sun and the moon are described repeatedly. First, let me quote one of the innumerable examples which show how day is represented :

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,

No bigger than the moon. (ll. 111 – 114)

This is what the Mariner sees in the sky when his ship is at a halt near the Line in the Pacific Ocean. The sun, red as blood, is glaring down on the ship, and the sky is brown as copper. We cannot see in the everyday world such strange hues in the sky at noon. Blood and copper seem generally inappropriate to express daylight. The old sailor also tells us that the sun is as small as the moon. Although it is noon, the sailor describes daylight with dark words and compares the sun with the moon. Here day is intermingled with night.

Next we shall observe how night is depicted. Day and night are often characterized by movement and stillness respectively. The Mariner remembers what he found at night around his ship, all alone in the ocean, describing the view in darkness as follows :

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night ;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white. (ll. 127 – 130)

The important point which should be noticed here is that there is a counter-image to the stillness and darkness of night. The fires dance about the ship with enthusiasm. The water burns brightly with dazzling colors. What we find under the moon is liveliness and brightness. The general images of day and night are reversed. From these remarks it becomes plain that day and night, or the sun and the moon, are interwoven.

We have discussed so far two oppositions in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": first, the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest ; and

second, the sun and the moon. When the poem is read superficially, the story would seem to be a Gothic one containing a weird character and supernatural scenes. However, a Gothic story need not have such a complex plot. Reading the poem from a metaphysical viewpoint solves the complexity; each character and scene can be considered as a symbol. For instance, the Mariner symbolizes unreality and the Wedding-Guest reality. More significantly, the two opposite elements are intermingled in the poem. And furthermore, the sun and the moon, which generally repel each other, co-exist therein. A metaphysical reading gives the chaotic story a sense of order, and the theory that the poem has a dual structure holds true. Here one must recall Coleridge's theory that Art, including poetry, imitates God's act of Creation and Imagination functions there. Reflection on these matters will make clear that Coleridge, as an creator, intends to imitate God's Creation with his Imagination in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"—that is to say, the poem can be construed as the cosmos imitated by a human being.

V. Conclusion

This thesis has considered "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" from Warren's viewpoint that the poem has a dual structure. We took two steps to reach this metaphysical interpretation of the poem, utilizing Coleridge's theories of Imagination and Art. First, it was observed that what he calls Imagination repeats God's eternal act of Creation in human beings' mortal minds. Second, we examined his view of Art, that is, that Art is an imitatress of nature. He declares that creators, including poets, should harmonize a state of antagonism,

as God created the cosmos out of primal chaos. These two issues brought us to an understanding of the dual structure of the poem "The Ancient Mariner," where opposites are harmonized by the poet's Imagination.

One can find in the heart of the poem Coleridge's wish to regard the poet, himself, in the same light as God in creating a state of union. This leads to the conclusion that we see in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the Creation imitated by a human being, and witness the function of the Imagination in such imitative work.

Notes

- 1) Robert Penn Warren, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading", James D. Boulger, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 21 – 47.
- 2) William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", *Lyrical Ballads, and other Poems, 1797–1800* (New York: Cornell UP, 1992), 95.
- 3) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria with his Aesthetical Essays*, ed. J. Shawcross, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), 58.
- 4) Wordsworth, "Lines", *Lyrical Ballads*.
- 5) Coleridge, vol. 1, 59.
- 6) Ibid., 202.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Coleridge, vol. 2, 253 – 263.
- 10) Ibid., 253.
- 11) Ibid., 255.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Ibid., 256.
- 14) Ibid., 254.
- 15) Wordsworth, "Preface", 99.
- 16) Coleridge, vol. 2, 49.
- 17) Ibid., 50.
- 18) Ibid.
- 19) Ibid.

- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Ibid., 56.
- 22) John Spencer Hill, *A Coleridge Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 111.
- 23) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", *Selected Poetry: Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).